DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 923 CS 010 474

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TITLE Sustaining Improvement: The Teacher's Role in Helping School Systems Learn.
PUB DATE 5 Feb 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Ohio Reading Recovery Program (Columbus, OH, February 5, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; *Educational Philosophy; *High Risk Students; Primary Education; *Remedial Reading; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Ohio Reading Recovery Program; *Reading Recovery Projects

ABSTRACT

One of the few efforts that arose in the 1980s that has much to teach the American educational system is Reading Recovery. Its contribution depends wholly upon what teachers do to make it work and what they do as professional educators to improve schooling for all America's children. Reading Recovery faces a variety of threats: it is educating children who were not supposed to be educated; it often is required to pass severe experimental requirements, yet the old programs were never tested; and it can be undermined by the desire to find shortcuts in implementing it. Teachers can do much to sustain improvements, if they: (1) adopt a "can-do" attitude; (2) do not wait for someone else to do it for them; (3) keep their enemies out in the open; (4) do not expect to win them all or for any to be won easily; (5) teach all those who have ears to hear and eyes to see; (6) build a constituency; (7) nurture a corps of friends; and (8) know that what Reading Recovery teachers are doing is important. Reading Recovery will not reach every child; it has never claimed to do so. What it does claim to do, and it does it very well in the hands of well-trained and dedicated teachers, is to teach a greater proportion of the historically neglected children of the world than any other previous method has ever done, and it does it more efficiently and effectively. (RS)

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SUSTAINING IMPROVEMENT: THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN HELPING SCHOOL SYSTEMS LEARN

Prepared for the Ohio Reading Recovery Program
Annual Meeting, Columbus, Ohio, February 5, 1990

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In the play, A Man for All Seasons, Sir Thomas Moore is talking with a young man who wants to become a politician. Moore is trying to persuade the youth to become a teacher. The 16th century yuppie views the suggestion with disdain: "Why! Who would know I ever existed?" Moore, unperturbed by the heat of the rebuff, replies quietly, "Only God, your pupils and the society you serve. Not a bad audience that!"

I do not know whether the young man laid aside his ambition, but Moore was speaking to everyone in this room, and the call is as important in the 1990's as it has ever been. In this room we all are performing before a God waiting for someone to pick up the flickering torch of America's grand experiment to provide universal education to every child of every person, before hordes of pupils whose large and unblinking eyes look into a future that seems bleak, and before a society that looks to us to find a way to change an educational system that has traditionally neglected the third of its children whose poverty or productivity will determine what the quality of life will be for all of us.

God, pupils and society: quite an audience that!

Last month I visited five schools that had initiated programs to help at-risk children. They had sincere, even enthusiastic teachers who were expending great energy in what they were doing. Yet, I left depressed because the observations reminded me too strongly that people in this profession destroy children every day with the very programs we initiate to save them. The low state of morale we see in many parts of the system remind us that we destroy ourselves as well.

I saw these innocent children dying in the care of loving teachers, going through some quack program that parasitically feeds on the ignorance in the profession. The class was centered upon a workbook program that had the teacher leading them through a reading of sound blends, short words and nonsense syllables. How in the name of Heaven, I ask you, is a child who is at risk of failing first-grade reading to tell when a new mix of letters and sounds is nonsense and when it makes sense?

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As the class recited through the litany, I became conscious of a mindless and meaningless staccato of sounds. The children's chorus would make the sound and the teacher nearly unthinkingly responded with the three phrases that some book salesman had taught in a short session called staff development. The rapidity was what called it to my attention. It sounded like this:

"Ah" "Wonderful" "Eh" "Excellent" "Can" "Very good"
"Man" "Excellent" "Fan" "Wonderful" "Ask" "Very Good"
"Task" "Wonderful" "Fask" "Very Good" "Lask"
"Excellent" "Sask" "Very Good. . ."

Sask? Fask? Eh? Our children <u>are</u> dying. At least, the salesman or the manual had suggested that the teacher vary the order in which she used the three "rewarding" echoes.

Every textbook and every manual is an assumption that teachers are too dumb to think about what they are to teach. This one was obviously written under the assumption that they are learning disabled as well. It directed the teacher to follow the teacher-centered choral prelude with duets. She put the children in pairs (not in itself a bad idea); one was to read and the other was called the helper. I noticed that none of the helpers were doing anything; so, I asked one of them, "What are you supposed to be doing?" He straightened up as a child does when addressed directly by an adult and responded, "Oh, I am supposed to say 'wonderful,' 'excellent' or 'very good' right after he says each word." My having reminded him, he began to use the same thoughtless staccato the teacher had modeled.

Those children are not Learning Disabled; they are, as Carol Lyons has written ( ), Instructionally Disabled. They deserve more and they will only respond to more. That means that every educator must endeavor to be an instrument for change. The school system that neglects those children must change its structures, its attitudes, and its processes. It must learn new ways of operating and thinking from kindergarten through graduate school, from the building discipline committee to the State Education Department. But systems are slow and reluctant learners, and they must be taught by patient and able teachers.

One of the few efforts that arose in the 1980's that has much to teach the system is Reading Recovery. Its contribution depends wholly upon what we do to make it work and to do what we can do as professional educators to improve schooling for all America's children. It takes more than a record of achievement, more than heart and sincerity to teach a school system new tricks, and we have come together to share a few ideas about change that may give us the power and the persistence to make and to continue to make a difference as we teach the system.

Threats to Reading Recovery

Since the firmest foundation from which one can launch an effort to improve a school system is a demonstrably successful record of achievement, we must first examine some threats to Reading Recovery so that we can not be accused of trying to re-arrange a system before we have cleaned up our own house.

The first threat is inherent in the history and tradition of the American school system: Reading Recovery is educating children who were not supposed to be educated.

The traditions that govern the American school system were designed as much to produce dropouts and failure as they were to produce successful high school graduates. Of course, no one says "We want you to produce dropouts." The process is more subtle; practices are commonly accepted and educators are prepared and rewarded in ways that they will produce dropouts even while they think they are educating.

What that means is that many of the practices, structures, and attitudes we find in school systems from prekindergarten to graduate school, from custodians to the State Department of Education are harmful to the types of children who enter Reading Recovery. Because those practices have become accepted habits, they are perpetrated by loving, well-meaning people who would do nothing intentionally to harm your children, but they are blind to the consequences of what they do. That leads to much indirect opposition to good schooling for those children.

But not all opposition is indirect.

Some portion of the people in any American community and some on the staff of the school systems purposefully and directly will oppose good instruction because they harbor deep-seated and time-honored prejudices against those children.

Some portion of any American community and some on the staff of the school systems purposefully and directly will oppose good instruction because they favor some other group of children or some other program that they see threatened by the resources that go to Reading Recovery.

No ethics will inhibit those who oppose a program. The quality of the program has very little effect upon what they will do. The child's welfare and learning is the least likely value to affect their use of both direct and indirect pressure to discredit what you do, to rid themselves of a perceived threat to their dominion or to prevent good schooling for those children you serve. I would speak here of two common methods they will use.

First, they may be expected to require you to adhere to a host of rules that were developed to protect the habitual ways of doing things. Sometimes these people will create rules that are not necessary. They will rigidly apply unreasonable rules that make it difficult for you to do what you must do. In organizational theory we call this goal displacement which most often appears as a substitution of means for ends; the way we do things becomes more important than what we set out to do. I've seen these take several forms:

> A superintendent tells a teacher that she has to have 5 million dollar liability insurance or she cannot transport a child to the Reading Recovery class.
>
> Someone in the central office declares that transporting children to a training site for reading is illegal even though the state education department has ruled that it is not. This informed official evidently forgot that the district is regularly transporting dozens of students to a basketball tournament.
>
> The evaluation department rules that you have to drop all the scores of children who fail to answer certain questions, thereby making it more likely that comparisons are unfair.
>
> Some official decides that a school can only have a reading recovery teacher if certain percentages of the children fall below a certain count or if no other school has greater need or if certain specific teachers volunteer to participate.
>
> A dean decides that people with doctorates or reading expertise are "too important to work with children."
>
> A central office person "loses" 700 mimeograph stencils containing the work of a group of teachers who prepared their own curriculum, thereby tying them to the official (ineffective) curriculum.

A second common way to defeat improvements is to require that new programs pass severe experimental requirements when the old programs are never tested.

Statistics, according to Mark Twain, complete a trio of ways to thwart rational action: lies, damned lies, and statistics. Statistics are a poor way to defend any educational program, though used by sincere and professionally responsible people, they can lead to some educational improvements. But statistics

can never be the only way to judge any educational effort. When statistics are applied by people who do not know what they are doing, great harm can be done to an educational innovation. However, when they are purposefully manipulated by people who are trying to destroy an innovation, they become vicious and reprehensible weapons, and, as the Han of LaHancha warns us, the "facts" they portray indeed become "the enemy of truth."

In such hands, the statistics can be controlled by outright falsification, or by carefully selecting the children who are to be compared, or by carefully selecting the test or the conditions of testing, or by writing conclusions that are not borne out by the figures in a table. When such people decide to destroy a program, they produce papers that look more scientific and erudite than a real research effort would produce; so, readers who are not knowledgeable will find the "facts" exceptionally persuasive. Such papers are often mailed to the desired audiences before -- or even without-- notifying the personnel in the program that is under attack.

Here we must also look <u>cost effectiveness</u> in the face. If you have not learned yet, you will, that people who talk most about cost effectiveness, especially when it applies to new programs, are not talking about effect at all; they are talking about the ratio of cost to the units subjected to the program. I have been in this business thirty years and have searched for ways to teach historically neglected children better and I have never seen a program that is as effective as this one you operate. Nothing I have seen is as cost eifective, though I have seen many. A program that does not result in the child's lasting, self-sustaining ability to continue learning cannot be called cost effective no matter how many children may be enrolled in it or how cheap the cost for each of those children. It should be simple enough to say a program that isn't effective cannot be cost effective.

It is time all of us in this profession recognize that <u>the traditional American school program, its structures and its processes have been a pilot program we have been trying for over a hundred years, and it has failed the types of children whom Reading Recovery reaches</u> and enables to become independent readers.

Now we must acknowledge that not all the threats to Reading Recovery are from outside. Some come from friends. Colin Dunkeld, of Portland State University and a member of your network, has prepared a paper entitled "Maintaining the Integrity of a Promising Program: The Case of Reading Recovery" which came to my attention only a week ago. I believe it is important to all of you and all of you have a stake in having it published somewhere soon. In it he discusses major threats to Reading Recovery and argues persuasively for maintaining the integrity of the program.

Among the threats he discusses are the eternal pressures on school people to solve problems quickly and easily, to do it quick and dirty. He discusses some but not all of these ways in which that pressure can erode Reading Recovery:

> teach Reading Recovery teachers in a couple of weekends or by having them read Marie Clay's book
>
> reduce quality control over who will be a reading recovery teacher or a trainer
>
> reduce the time behind the glass to zero or less than is necessary
>
> reduce the sharing of feedback
>
> try to escape having to teach a child
>
> shortcut the supply of books or try cheaper or easier supplies.

A constant pressure is to serve more children cheaper. Dunkeld discusses the problem in this way:

> There is an ever-present temptation on the part of some administrators to take a program and adapt it to local needs, local pressures, or local budgets. Concerned about the high cost of individualized instruction, some administrators hypothesize that cost effectiveness would be improved by adapting the program for use with small groups. This is a researchable question and empirical answers should be sought. Until answers are obtained [we must recognize that]. . . it is almost certainly because of this finely tuned adjustment [made possible by the one-to-one instruction] that children do reach the average level of the class as quickly as they do and that they do learn to work independently. Groups tend to keep most children in the program longer than they really need to be there, or they neglect the most needy children. . . Though more children would be served in a group [I wish he would say they would be <u>attending</u> a group], they would almost certainly remain in the group longer, and it is doubtful they would be served anywhere nearly as well (p. 17).

The temptation to shortcut is always there, and the profession has many members who are either ignorant or unethical enough to encourage it. The thinking that propels it into action is the same that substitutes an hour's speech from a so-called motivational speaker to 1500 teachers in an auditorium for genuine staff development, or that substitutes an extra year of graduate courses for genuine teacher preparation. Such thinking

on the part of people who would have us believe them to be educators has destroyed or crippled many projects that might otherwise have succeeded:

> The Effective Schools efforts often feel it is too expensive or too difficult to work on the teachers' attitude that children can succeed and choose instead to train the principals in a weekend or two and send them home ready to "strong leader" and "monitor" a school and an innovation to death.
>
> Team teaching was an effective way to deliver instruction and empower teachers, but no college taught preservice teachers to work with other adults and school systems neglected to do the necessary staff development, mistakenly thinking that teamwork came naturally.
>
> Informal education was an outstanding way to teach free citizens and sound thinkers, but too many thought it was a function of architectural design or a laissez faire methodology and not a fundamentally different philosophy requiring essentially more sound professional guidance, and the bandwagoners abandoned it, preferring to blast the innovation rather than do what was required for success.
>
> Non-graded programs could have broken the lockstep ineffectiveness of the batch-lot methods we currently use for schooling children, but again people adopted the form without understanding the substance or doing what was necessary for success.

If we have learned anything from the Reading Recovery efforts in this country it is that <u>there are no shortcuts to quality results</u>. It takes time to prepare effective teachers and it takes time to have non-readers become avid readers. It takes time, but, <u>more than that, it takes dedication, competence and determination</u> -- three qualities that are in short supply but for which there is no cheap substitute.

<u>Basic Principles Governing Change</u>

In the last chapter of the <u>Handbook for Developing Schools With Good Discipline</u> (1982) which we entitled "How Can a School Get Started on Improvement?" we presented eight "Principles to Guide Change Efforts" (Pp.).

> THE CHANGE PROCESS IS NOT AS RATIONAL AS PLANNERS WOULD LEAD US TO BELIEVE.

SOMEONE BENEFITS FROM PRESERVING THE STATUS QUO, NO MATTER HOW BAD OR NON-PRODUCTIVE IT SEEMS TO BE.

NOT EVERYONE HAS TO BE INVOLVED IN ORDER TO BRING ABOUT IMPROVEMENT.

SUCCESSFUL CHANGE MAY STILL BE ACHIEVED IN THE WORST OF SITUATIONS.

LACK OF RESOURCES IS AN EXCUSE, NOT A REASON, FOR DOING NOTHING.

SUCCESSFUL CHANGE DEPENDS NOT ONLY ON THOROUGH PLANNING BUT ALSO UPON THE ABILITY TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF UNEXPECTED OCCURRENCES.

SOMEONE MUST FEEL THE NEED TO IMPROVE AND MUST HAVE THE WILL AND PERSEVERANCE TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.

IF YOU THINK IMPROVEMENT IS IMPOSSIBLE, IT WILL BE.

To those we must add two more that cannot be ignored without jeopardizing children's welfare and your sanity:

EXCEPT IN RARE INDIVIDUAL INSTANCES, CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND WELFARE IS VERY LOW ON THE LIST OF PRIORITIES THAT INFLUENCE DECISION-MAKING AND ACTION ANYWHERE IN THE SYSTEM.

THE SUCCESS OR RIGHTNESS OF A PROGRAM IS NOT ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN IT IN THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN WHICH WE WORK. INDEED, SUCCESS MAY BE HELD AGAINST IT.

<u>So What Can Teachers Do to Sustain Improvements?</u>

I. <u>Adopt a can-do attitude</u>; become part of the solution not the problem.

Don't limit yourself by deciding what can or cannot be done and then preventing yourself from ever starting. Even a mosquito doesn't get a pat on the back until he or she goes to work.

Become persistent problem-solvers, not blamers or pass-the-buckers. Avoid the Stella Dallas or Sue Ellen view of life. Those soap-opera queens saw life as a field of forces in which their goals are totally surrounded by an impenetrable barrier. they visualized their world as a place in which you never could "get there from here." But self-disciplined, responsible adults do not

see the world that way at all. They know that any world in which one lives is one that has goals in it. They know that there are ways to achieve those goals that are not even perceived yet. They also know that there are barriers to any goal that is worthwhile, but those barriers are not impenetrable nor do they totally surrounding the goal; they are finite and one can go <u>over</u> some, <u>under</u> others, <u>around</u> some, and <u>through</u> others. Effective teachers in good schools spend their time deciding how to go over, under, around or through the barriers that stand in their way.

II. <u>Don't wait for John Alden to do it for you</u>; he may run away with your wife.

Try not to become "someone's baby." When they leave, you will be an orphan. Let many people take credit for your efforts and welcome their "buying in."

Don't let others evaluate your program alone. Keep your own data and try hard to keep up with what evaluators are reporting to others.

Never accept someone else's definition of policy -- check it out, preferably with the person who wrote it.

Don't let negative staff members set the tone; you will end up on a sour note. We have found that you can change a school with only one third of the staff, particularly if that third includes the principal.

III. <u>Keep it all out in the light</u>; rape occurs in the shadows.

As much as possible keep your enemies out in the open. they can do much damage behind your back and in the dark. In higher education much progress is blocked by midnight attacks at the higher level.

This program is better than any other program with this group of children and its best product is sustained success. It also is the best genuine teacher preparation taking place anywhere. Don't hide your light under a bushel; make sure others know about your successes. Collect information about your program and make sure all relevant audiences get it.

Don't lie about or hide your problems or shortcomings. No one wins respect by pretending success when every onlooker can see you are failing. Analyze what is happening and use your problem-solving skills.

On the other hand, be properly humble about the accomplishments; don't crow too much. And don't run yourself down. Let others do it for you.

IV. Don't expect to win them all or for any to be won easily, else you will always play in the minor leagues.

Good programs gather more opposition than poor ones; if it weren't so, the principles of change described earlier would not apply, and the educational system would have be much more successful than it is. You must set your mental attitude before you start that you will lose some. You may even lose more than you win. So many educators think they should win every time they go out, and with no effort. If students presented no resistance to learning, no one would need teachers. If change occurred without hardship, no one would need leaders.

V. Teach all those who have ears to hear and eyes to see; else you leave them deaf and blind.

Treat everyone like a learner. Principals, school board members, state education personnel, and other teachers -- everyone learns according to the same principles that you want them to apply to children; you must treat them as you know your young learners have to be treated.

Prepare yourself to be teachers for many clients, not just the children you serve. Parents, other teachers, administrators, the non-certified staff, the community -- all have a right to demand some information and knowledge, and they will when goaded to do so. They have a right to learn the truth. And they can be your best ambassadors or protectors when the inevitable attacks come.

Respect others' efforts; they, too, are trying and have been, sometimes before you ever started.

VI. Build a constituency. Actually build many constituencies or you will find yourself out on a limb all alone.

Work to make friends for yourself and for the project. You will never know in what way or what place they may be helpful to you. Teaching is a lot like some of the fairy tales in which the person sets out to reach a goal and is stopped by beggars and needy people who turn out to be kings and princes in the end. Treated kindly, these acquaintances make powerful allies, but once ignored, they are not inclined to stand firm when you need them.

You will need other teachers at some time. You will need a friendly administrator. You will need a school board member. You will need parents and other community people whose voices and actions are important to your success. You cannot protect and

expand any teaching effort if you confine your contacts to those within the classroom walls. Make reading Recovery important to all those people; they will be ambassadors when you need them. When you need them is too late to inform them or expect their help; that develops over time and must happen when there is no obvious reason why you would be wooing them.

VI. Nurture a corps of friends; safety nets are better than nooses any time.

Maintain your network of supportive colleagues. Maintain and cherish this network. You are part of something that very few educators ever get to experience; a group of skilled colleagues who have pooled their knowledge, their energy, and their efforts so that every member can become more successful than any one individual could ever hope to be. Practically no college faculty ever gets to experience it because the dynamics of higher education work against it. the best example of collegial synergy in the United States today is the Reading Recovery Staff at Ohio State University; it should be a model for what a college can become.

Of all the things that I envy Gay, the first is a secretary who will do all that secretaries do to add quality to your production, but the second is YOU -- your network. These calls that come in at midnight from Chicago or Tucson or Texas that begin with "Wait until you hear what Johnnie or Janie, Tanya or Antony, Lakesha or Lamonte did today!" and the house is filled with the wonder of some learner's success. and my heart fills with the wonder of people who can make that happen and share it with one another.

Colin Dunkeld recognizes that the network is built upon and sustained by the type of relationships that are established for teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers of teacher leaders. He says,

> the long term integrity of the program depends upon the recognition and willing acceptance of the existence of this thorough and disciplined support system. It is not a meaningless, bureaucratic imposition. It is productive and functional in every detail. And, because of this, its existence must be recognized and supported in every possible way.

VII. Know that what you do is important, or risk never doing anything important.

In Brussels one can visit the Grand Place which was erected by the workmen of the city after the Dukes of Burgundy had

levelled it with a barrage of cannon. On the Northwest corner is a brass plate commemorating the workers and thumbing their nose at the Dukes and their cannon. Unfortunately I must paraphrase it, but I think I have caught its spirit.

> This place was erected by the workingmen of Brussels. It is a memorial to the indomitable spirit of the common working person whose efforts determine the course of history. May it stand as a tribute to them and a reminder of the foolhardy arrogance of those who believe that their brief earthly fame and position make them more important to history.

In the long run, <u>what we each do in the place we happen to be with whomever happens to be there is our contribution to history</u>. Miss that while pursuing an elusive fame or power, and we have missed our chance. What you do in the place you are for the time you can do it is what makes a life worthwhile.

Every teacher must know that he or she may not change the world on a grand scale, but that the world in truth changes significantly when each of us, no matter how humble the contribution, knows that the small change we can make in the place where we are and with the people with whom we interact is worthwhile and that the course of history is only changed when many people add their small contributions and carry out their unheralded responsibilities resolutely and with determination to do our best for those we touch. When I was in school, we read about a Little Dutch Boy who sat all night using his thumb to plug a leak in the earthen dike that prevented the sea from flooding his homeland. He and his benumbed thumb were as vital to the history of Holland as all the kings and all the engineers who ordered the dikes and named the canals. Without him, their efforts would have been inundated.

<u>This Legacy We Bear; This Torch We Carry</u>

Reading Recovery will not reach every child; it has never claimed to do so. What it does claim to do, and it does it very well in the hands of well-trained and dedicated teachers, is to teach a greater proportion of the historically neglected children of the world than any previous method has ever done and it does it more efficiently and effectively.

If Reading Recovery fails to live up to that promise, the failure will not be due to the students' shortcomings nor to any faults in Marie Clay's approaches; it will happen because individuals lack the dedication, competency, or determination necessary to make it work. It will happen because we work in an educational system that does not intend to have at-risk children learn.

The 1980's have been frustrating and even disheartening for people who want to improve the schools. The Little Engine That Could that symbolized the 1960's has given way to the Chicken Little phenomenon of the 80's.

But, as one Reading Recovery teacher recently told me, we need to keep hearing over and over again that one person can make a difference. In these times of internal uncertainty and retrenchment and external attack, bash and abandonment we must think like the East Germans who kept faith that change could come for many more years than we have had to sustain and against higher odds -- at least against our own welfare -- than we have had to face. The walls of ignorance can be brought down and they must be brought down, and their coming down depends upon each one of us catching the fever to make a difference and catching others up in the effort.

One of the real victories of the 1980's that can be held as a beacon of optimism for all of us who have seen it and worked in it is Reading Recovery.

The staff and teachers who work in it have shown a cynical and selfish world that dedicated people, working together for a genuine and authentic purpose larger than themselves and willing to lay aside old prejudices to learn new ideas and skills can make a difference in themselves, in the children they serve, in a profession that has grown lax and self-centered, and in a school, a state, and a nation. Few in our generation will ever have the satisfaction of having made such a dent.

No educators would be needed if education was easily accomplished. The future of the Reading Recovery approach to teaching children who ordinarily are failed by the educational system depends in great part upon how well each teacher there plays his or her role in the change process. It requires a larger view and stronger efforts than ordinary teaching does. Like all good teaching, it is tiring on some days and frustrating on others. But the effort somehow seems worthwhile when a former non-reader looks up with a triumphant beam after reading a whole book and asks his adult listener, "How do you like my strategies?"

Only God, your pupils and the society you serve -- not a bad audience that.